

EXHIBIT

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EDUCATION

Federal cuts to Michigan Head Start leave providers searching for answers



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Key Points

The Trump administration closed five out of 10 regional Head Start offices last week, claiming \$1.8 billion in annual budget savings.

Last week, the [Trump administration](#) laid off all staff in the federal Office of Head Start’s regional office serving Michigan and six other neighboring states. The office, which was based in Chicago, was formerly one of 10 regional Head Start offices across the country.

Michigan Head Start offices say they were caught off guard by the move and are worried about what staff cuts will mean for the Office of Head Start’s ability to meet their needs including, for some, the timely release of federal funds to keep their doors open or do needed building improvements.

“None of us saw this coming, it was just absolutely sudden,” said Janice Smith, early childhood services director at the Oakland Livingston Human Service Agency. Chicago office staff, she said, “were not even given the opportunity to contact programs to let us know that this was happening or who to contact instead.”

These regional offices provide organizations that receive Head Start funding — who themselves provide services to low-income children in their communities — with essential support like dispersing and approving funds, providing technical training,

answering program questions and overseeing compliance with the federal program's standards.

According to an email Head Start providers received from the Department of Health and Human Services a couple days after the cuts, the Chicago office's closure are part of a broader consolidation of the 10 regional offices into five in accordance with President Donald Trump's so-called "Department of Government Efficiency Workforce Optimization Initiative," naming the Chicago office's closure in addition to Boston, New York, Seattle and San Francisco. An HHS spokesperson said department leaders targeted cutting redundant administrative positions in the highest cost cities.

The email sent by Laurie Todd-Smith, deputy assistant secretary for Early Childhood Development at HHS, assured Head Start recipients that the restructuring would not affect the services they rely on from the federal Office of Head Start and would save taxpayers \$1.8 billion per year. Responding to a request for comment, Emily Hilliard, press secretary for the federal Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees Head Start, said that "all statutorily required positions and offices will remain intact."

Head Start providers in Michigan say they have yet to receive information on what the transition will look like or who they should turn to for support. The email from Todd-Smith instructed providers with urgent questions to get in touch using an online Head Start system that would be monitored by Office of Head Start staff "to address any immediate assistance needs."

Advocates: [More money needed for child care in Whitmer's budget before 'crisis gets worse'](#)

But the instruction has been unhelpful in practice, providers say, because "the only people you can select to communicate with are no longer there," Smith said. The guidance has created more questions than answers, providers say.

A few days after the firings, local Head Start providers received the names of some existing staff at the Office of Head Start to turn to with questions about their grants,

said Tricia Grifka, the director of early childhood services at the Northeast Michigan Community Service Agency. These names came through contacts, not official channels, she said.

Providers say they are concerned that the staffing cuts will cause chaos in the remaining regional offices and lead to long wait times to get money, approvals and answers to questions, all of which would hinder their ability to serve children and families in their communities.

‘Left in limbo’

One of the potential impacts of the staffing cuts is shutting down. Madonna Princer, director of the nonprofit Head Start for Kent County, faces this possibility. Her organization serves about 1,200 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Just last week, she was speaking with her point of contact in the Head Start regional Chicago office, letting them know that she was waiting on the second half of her annual \$22 million operational funds which were slated to come in sometime in April, but had been stalled due to delays in the federal budget process.

“Now there's nobody at the regional office, and nobody did anything about it last week,” Princer said. “I'm kind of left in limbo. Now, what? Who do I now make aware this is a problem?”

Head Start grantees have different fiscal year timelines, but all receive 50% of their annual funds in the first half of their fiscal year, and the next 50% in the second half. In the vast majority of cases, they are not allowed to save funds they don't use — they must use or lose them, so they don't have rainy day funds on which to rely.

Princer doesn't know whether her funding will make it to her in time to keep her doors open. She's also worried that the nuances of her funding situation will get lost on whoever her new point of contact ends up being, which she fears could lead to even further delays.

If the rest of the funding doesn't come through, she'll have to close her doors mid-May when she runs out of money. That would mean laying off her 400 staff members and stopping all services for the low-income children and families who qualify for the program. This includes home-visits for expecting parents, child care and early learning classrooms for kids, and opportunities for parents to get involved in their child's care and learning in addition to practical services like providing transportation, which allow families to participate.

But Princer is hopeful. She attended a meeting with other Head Start providers in the state where they were given the names of two individuals at the Office of Head Start they could reach out to for the time being. One of those people Princer said she'd worked with in the past, which might give her an advantage when advocating for the funds her program has already been approved for.

"I feel like now, at least, I have somebody that I can send an email to, who is working, No. 1, that still has a job and that has been working with my program," Princer said. "Let's send him an email and ask if he knows anything."

Uncertainty looms

Head Start providers across Michigan face other challenges as a result of the Trump administration's staffing cuts that could hinder their ability to care for children.

Grifka said her staff was waiting to hear back about a request they'd submitted to the Chicago regional office for approval to use Head Start funds for building improvements they need to make to comply with Michigan child care licensing requirements.

The licensing process is already complicated and Grifka worries that the confusion and lack of plan amid the staffing cuts will only increase the time it'll take to hear back on that approval and further delay the process of getting the classrooms up and running for kids.

“We’re currently doing home visits with those families, but those families really want their kid in a center program and doing those repairs and construction will make that happen,” Grifka said.

Shayna Wilson, a mom of three in Whittaker, south of Ypsilanti in Washtenaw County, has her youngest daughter in Head Start. Wilson enrolled her at 2 years old and said Head Start has allowed her daughter access to high-quality early education at no cost to the low-income family, in addition to all kinds of supports she said you wouldn’t get at a typical child care or school: free testing to understand their child’s developmental progress, resources for families who are in need of clothes, food or are having trouble paying bills, and parent support groups.

“They’re very helpful in getting everything that you need for yourself and for your child, to make sure all your needs are met,” Wilson said.

The program has allowed her child the opportunity to learn in a setting Wilson wouldn’t be able to afford otherwise. She has seen her become more social through structured time spent with other kids her age and learn building blocks like how to write her name — seemingly small things, but all in service of making sure she’s ready for kindergarten, Wilson said.

Washtenaw County is not in immediate danger of shutting down since it already received both operational grants for the year and is set through June 30.

Nonetheless, staffing cuts make the future uncertain for all Head Start providers, said Ashley Kryscynski, director of communications at the Washtenaw Intermediate School District.

Wilson said she can’t imagine life for her child without the program, and said she has seen its ability to transform kids’ lives.

“Essentially, they’re giving their kids hope,” Wilson said. “They’re pushing them to become whatever they want to be. I’m just so amazed at the program. (It’s) been around for 60 years now, and if they were to cut it, myself, and other families would take a great loss of being able to provide them a journey with quality education.”

Providers remain 'watchful'

The staffing cuts come on the heels of another recent cut to Head Start providers who were made aware a few weeks ago that the federal government would not fund cost of living adjustment grants for Head Start providers this year. Providers used this grant money to cover the rising cost of things like insurance premiums for their staff.

This could have ripple effects on Head Start providers in Michigan already dealing with high turnover due to industrywide low wages and benefits.

“Increased monthly premiums and no wage increases is going to push people out of that system,” said Kryscynski.

The funding cut also threatens the county’s ability to serve as many kids. Currently, Washtenaw Intermediate School District serves about 450 children through Head Start. “If we have the options of either expanding, maintaining or reducing, ideally we're maintaining or expanding, right? But any loss of funding means that we'll have to reduce,” she said.

While her immediate worry is the lack of staff to support Head Start offices across the state and county, Grifka says that her other worry is that this is just the beginning of even larger-scale impacts like potential budget cuts to the Head Start program.

“As of right now, we’re not concerned about that funding,” Grifka said. “But we are absolutely watchful.”

Beki San Martin is a fellow at the Detroit Free Press who covers child care, early childhood education and other issues that affect the lives of children ages 5 and under and their families in metro Detroit and across Michigan. Contact her at rsanmartin@freepress.com

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